

Gravimetric Soil Moisture Protocols



Purpose

To measure soil water content by mass

Overview

Students collect soil samples with a trowel or auger and weigh them, dry them, and then weigh them again. The soil water content is determined by calculating the difference between the wet sample mass and the dry sample mass.

Student Outcomes

Students will be able to collect soil samples from the field and then measure their soil moisture and record and report soil moisture data.

Students will be able to relate soil moisture measurements to the physical and chemical properties of the soil.

Science Concepts

Earth and Space Sciences

Earth materials are solid rocks, soil, water, biota, and the gases of the atmosphere.

Soils have properties including color, texture structure, and density; they support the growth of many types of plants and serve numerous other functions in the ecosystem.

The surface of Earth changes.

Soils consist of rocks and minerals less than 2 mm, organic material, air and water.

Water circulates through soil affecting its properties.

Physical Sciences

Objects have observable properties.

Scientific Inquiry Abilities

Identify answerable questions.

Design and conduct an investigation.

Use appropriate mathematics to analyze data.

Develop descriptions and explanations using evidence.

Communicate procedures and explanations.

Time

20-45 minutes to collect samples

5-15 minutes to weigh wet samples

5-15 minutes to weigh dry samples

Samples dry in a drying oven overnight.

Alternatively, samples can be dried in a microwave. They need to be weighed repeatedly during the drying process. This method requires more student time.

Level

All

Frequency

To support the GLOBE soil moisture campaign, the following time periods are encouraged for as many sites as possible:

First 2 weeks of October, in conjunction with World Space and Earth Science Week

Fourth week in April in conjunction with Earth Day Week

Additionally, twelve or more times per year for the same site at daily, weekly or monthly intervals

Materials and Tools

Soil drying oven or microwave

Thermometer (capable of measuring to 110° C) if using a drying oven

Microwave-safe container if using a microwave oven for soil drying

Balance or scale with 0.1 g sensitivity (600 g capacity recommended, 400 g minimum capacity required)

Hot pad or oven mitt

Meter stick

Ruler marked in millimeters

Permanent markers to label soil containers

**Star Pattern:**

Star Pattern Soil Moisture Data Sheet

Trowel

6 soil collection containers (sealable soil sample cans, jars or plastic bags)

Transect:

Transect Soil Moisture Data Sheet

Trowel

50 meter tape or 50 meter rope marked every 5 meters

13 soil collection containers (sealable soil sample cans, jars or plastic bags)

Depth Profile:

Depth Profile Soil Moisture Data Sheet

Auger

5 soil collection containers (sealable soil sample cans, jars or plastic bags)

Preparation

Decide upon the sampling frequency and method.

Weigh each soil sample container without its lid and record its mass and container number on the container.

Choose and define a soil moisture site.

Prerequisites

None

Gravimetric Soil Moisture Protocol – Introduction

Soil acts like a sponge spread across the land surface. It absorbs rain and snowmelt, slows runoff and helps to control flooding. The absorbed water is held on soil particle surfaces and in pore spaces between particles. This water is available for use by plants during times of little precipitation. Some of this water evaporates back into the air; some drains through the soil into groundwater. Absorbent soils, like those found in wetlands, soak up floodwaters and release them slowly, preventing damaging runoff. Soils that are *saturated* with water have no available space to hold additional water causing new rainfall to flow across the surface to low lying areas. Measuring the amount of water stored in the soil determines the ability of soil to moderate the hydrologic cycle. This valuable environmental indicator also helps to estimate the soil-water balance – the pattern of how much water is stored in a soil over a year.

In order for most plants to grow, they need a place to take root, water, and nutrients. Generally, the nutrients come from dissolved soil minerals and organic matter and are carried to plants by soil water. Sometimes water flowing downward through the soil removes chemicals and nutrients from upper soil layers and deposits them deeper in the ground. The process by which materials are removed from the soil by water is known as *leaching*. Leached materials may be held in lower layers of the soil or may stay in the water and flow into rivers, lakes, and groundwater.

Water is an important element in the weathering processes that break rock apart to form soil. For example, in cold climates, water in cracks will freeze and expand, causing rocks to break apart. When water thaws and flows away, it moves broken rock parts with it. This *freeze-thaw* action is a primary soil builder. In tropical climates, water breaks rock apart and helps to form soil particles and minerals by dissolving the rock.

Water also supports the decay of dead plants and animals into soil organic matter but only when oxygen from the air is present. In some places, the soil is so waterlogged that oxygen is excluded and plant and animal remains are preserved for centuries because of their slow rate of decomposition.

Some of the water stored in the soil evaporates back into the atmosphere. This evaporation cools the soil and increases the relative humidity of the air, sometimes affecting local weather and climate. The amount of water in the soil also affects soil temperature. Because liquid water has a higher *heat capacity* than either air or soil, more heat is required to increase the temperature of moist soil. Water in soil decreases the rate of soil warming and increases the rate of soil cooling, so moist soils tend to be cooler than dry soils.



Teacher Support

Preparation

Before beginning the *Soil Moisture Protocol*, have students fill out the *Soil Moisture Site Definition Sheet*. Have students weigh their soil sample containers in advance and write the mass on each container with a permanent marker. Mark each container with an identifying number.

Frequency of Measurement

To support the GLOBE soil moisture campaign, every GLOBE school is encouraged to make at least one triplicate soil moisture measurement twice a year during the first 2 weeks of October, in conjunction with World Space and Earth Science Week and the fourth week of April in conjunction with Earth Day Week. This is also a good opportunity to collect land cover data at any soil moisture site that is homogenous over a 90 m by 90 m area.

In addition, soil moisture data are collected at a single site close enough to a school so that soil moisture data can be collected for at least 12 regularly spaced intervals. Students may want to coordinate their soil moisture sampling times with the collection of other GLOBE measurements that may affect soil moisture, such as precipitation. If students identify the annual pattern of precipitation at their school, then they may want to collect soil moisture samples when the soil changes from wet to dry conditions. For example, if the school receives rain in early March then less rain in May, students could do a 12-week study from March through May. If the rainy season is spread out, students might do a study taking samples every 2 weeks for 24 weeks, or even a monthly sample throughout the year.

The number of sampling times can always be increased, but students should try to sample the wet, intermediate and dry times surrounding major wet periods. Sampling once or twice a week all year will definitely provide students with valuable insights into patterns of soil moisture.

Measurement Procedures

It is important for students to place soil samples in well-sealed containers and to weigh the samples (without their lids), as soon as possible after collecting them. If samples dry out even a little before being weighed, the soil moisture data will be wrong.

Samples are dried until all water is removed and then weighed for a second time. The difference in the mass before and after drying equals the mass of water that was present in the soil. Scientists call this the *gravimetric* technique, which means a measurement by weighing.

The ratio of the mass of water to the mass of dry soil is the *soil water content*. The mass of water is divided by the dry soil mass to get a normalized value for soil water content. This normalized value can be compared with other measurements on other days even though the size of the soil samples may vary from one day to the next. It also permits valid comparisons among different sites.

The *Soil Moisture Protocol* offers three choices for sampling: *the Star Pattern*, *the Transect*, and *the Depth Profile*. The purpose of the sampling patterns is to systematically avoid digging in the same place twice. Choose the sampling pattern that best complements the other GLOBE measurements students are taking, as well as educational objectives and students' research interests.

1. *The Star Pattern* involves collecting soil samples from 12 different locations at twelve different time periods in a 2 m x 2 m star-shaped area. For each of the 12 locations, three spots are chosen within 25 cm of each other. Samples from the top 5 cm and from 10 cm deep are collected at each of the three spots, for a total of 6 samples at each location on the star. This sampling method can be easily coordinated with the *Soil Temperature Protocol*, whereby students collect their soil temperature measurements at the same depths and locations as the soil moisture measurements.
2. *The Transect Pattern* requires an open space of at least 50 m length. Thirteen samples are collected from the top 5 cm of soil.



This pattern allows students to see spatial variations in surface soil moisture measurements. It is also useful for comparison with soil moisture data collected remotely from satellites or aircraft. These remote measurement techniques sense moisture contained in the top 5 cm of soil and their measurements are averaged over areas of 100's of square meters or more.

3. *The Depth Profile* involves taking a sample of the top 5 cm and the use of an auger to take soil samples at depths of 10 cm, 30 cm, 60 cm, and 90 cm. Using an auger takes a bit of extra time, but this effort gathers valuable data and complements the *Soil Characterization Protocol* and the *Optional Air and Soil Temperature Protocol*.

To reduce the labor involved in microwave oven drying, students should leave their soil samples to air dry uncovered for a few days after measuring their initial wet weights and then dry them in the microwave.

Gravimetric soil moisture sampling disturbs the natural state of the soil, so students should never sample twice from the same point within a period of several years. They can either offset the transect or shift the center of their star within a 10 m diameter area.

Managing Materials

Make sure that soil sample containers can be tightly sealed to prevent moisture from evaporating. Soil cans will rust unless they are thoroughly dried after each use.

If you must use labels on the containers, make sure that they will not come off during the oven drying process.

Remember that lids must be removed for drying, so weigh containers without their lids.

Balances should be placed on flat surfaces and calibrated before use.

Managing Students

Soil moisture samples can be collected most efficiently by small groups of students: one or two students for each pair of 5 cm and 10 cm samples in the Star Pattern, one or two students per station along the Transect, and two to four students for the depth profile samples. These same students or a few additional students can do the *Soil Temperature Protocol* at the same time.

Supporting Activities

To introduce students to the concepts that soil holds water, that there are many variables affecting how much water soil holds, and that water quality is affected as it passes through the soil, have them do the *Just Passing Though Learning Activity*.

To help students better understand the concept of soil water content, have them do the *Soils as Sponges Learning Activity*.

Questions For Further Investigation

What other GLOBE schools have patterns of soil moisture similar to yours?

How many weeks of the year is your soil relatively wet or relatively dry?

Does soil moisture change during the winter?

Which areas around your school are usually dry or wet? Why?

Which holds the most water: clay, sand, or silt? Why? Which provides the most moisture to plants?

Does the type of land cover affect the amount of water that enters the soil? Does it affect the rate at which soil dries out following a rainstorm?

How does the porosity of a soil horizon relate to the amount of water that horizon can hold?

How does soil water content change from one horizon to another in the same profile?

What happens to the downward flow of water if there is a coarse textured (sandy) horizon overlying a horizon with high clay content? What happens to water flow if a clayey horizon is found over a sandy horizon?

How are soil moisture and relative humidity related?

Star Pattern Soil Moisture Protocol

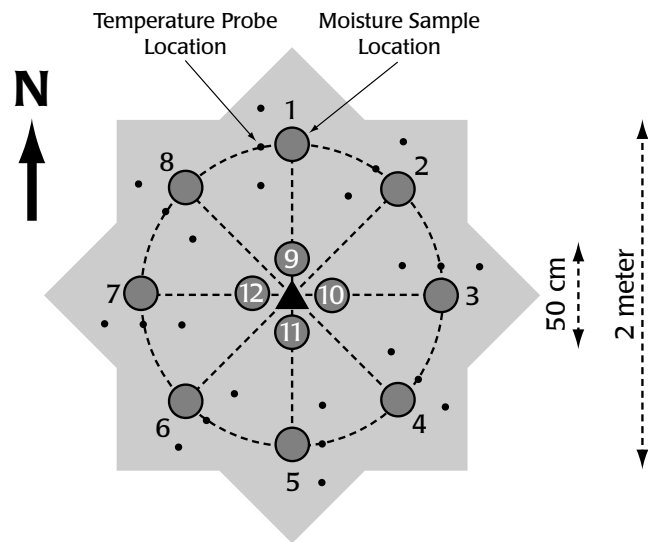
Field Guide

Task

Collect soil moisture samples at depths of 0-5 cm and 10 cm.

What You Need

- ☐ *Star Pattern Soil Moisture Data Sheet*
- ☐ Compass (to locate sampling point)
- ☐ Trowel
- ☐ 6 soil sample containers weighed and labeled with their mass and a container number
- ☐ Meter stick
- ☐ Ruler marked in millimeters
- ☐ Science Log
- ☐ Pen or pencil



In the Field

1. Complete the top portion of the *Star Pattern Soil Moisture Data Sheet*.
2. Locate your sampling point on the star and cut or pull away any grass or groundcover.
3. Dig a hole 10-15 cm in diameter down to 5 cm. Leave the soil loose in the hole.
4. Remove from the loose soil any rocks larger than a pea (about 5 mm), large roots, worms, grubs, and other animals.
5. Use your trowel to fill a soil container with at least 100 g of the loose soil.
6. Immediately seal the container to hold in the moisture.
7. Record the container mass and number on the *Data Sheet* next to Sample 1, 0-5 cm.
8. Remove all of the soil from the hole down to a depth of 8 cm.
9. In a clean container, collect a soil sample that contains the soil between 8 and 12 cm. Remember to remove rocks, large roots, and animals. Seal the container.
10. Record the container mass and number on the *Data Sheet* next to Sample 1, 10 cm.
11. Return remaining soil to the hole.
12. Repeat steps 3 – 11 twice in new holes within 25 cm of the original sample point filling the other four cans and recording the container numbers and masses for samples 2 and 3 at both depths. You should have six containers of soil taken from three holes.

Transect Soil Moisture Protocol

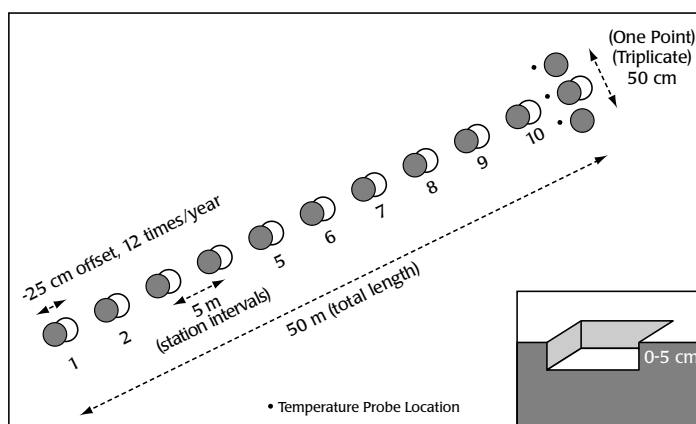
Field Guide

Task

Collect soil moisture samples at a depth of 0-5 cm along a 50 meter transect.

What You Need

- ☐ *Transect Pattern Soil Moisture Data Sheet*
- ☐ Trowels (1 per student group)
- ☐ 13 soil sample containers weighed and labeled with their mass and a container number
- ☐ 50 meter tape or 50 meter rope marked every 5 meters
- ☐ Rulers marked in millimeters (1 per student group)
- ☐ Science Log
- ☐ Pen or pencil



In the Field

1. Complete the top portion of the *Transect Pattern Soil Moisture Data Sheet*.
2. Stretch out your rope or measuring tape along the transect you will measure.
3. Locate your sampling point along the transect. Sample points should be every 5 meters along the transect, plus 2 extra samples taken at one end of the transect within 25 cm of the end point. Sample points should be numbered starting with Sample 1 at the beginning of the transect.
4. Cut or pull away any grass or groundcover above your sample point.
5. Dig a hole 10-15 cm in diameter down to 5 cm. Leave this soil loose in the hole.
6. Remove from the loose soil any rocks larger than a pea (about 5 mm), large roots, worms, grubs, and other animals.
7. Use your trowel to fill your soil container with at least 100 g of the loose soil.
8. Immediately seal the container to hold in the moisture.
9. Record the container number, mass, and distance to the start point of the transect on the *Data Sheet* next to the appropriate Sample Number.
10. Continue to collect a sample at each sampling point along the transect. Remember to remove rocks, large roots, and animals. Seal each container and record the sample number and distance from the start point of the transect on the *Data Sheet*.

Including the extra 2 samples taken near the end point, you should have 13 containers of soil taken from along your transect.

Depth Profile Soil Moisture Protocol

Field Guide

Task

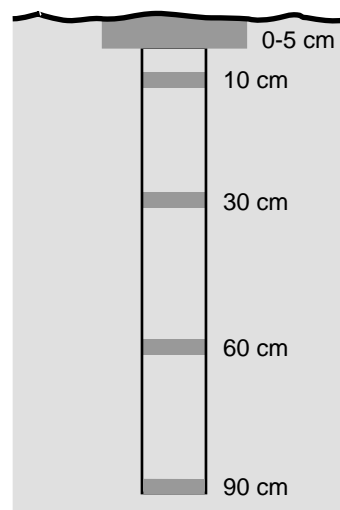
Collect soil moisture samples at depths of 0-5 cm, 10 cm, 30 cm, 60 cm and 90 cm.

What You Need

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depth Profile Soil Moisture Data Sheet | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 soil sample containers weighed and labeled with their mass and a container number |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Compass (to locate sampling point) | <input type="checkbox"/> Meter stick |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trowel | <input type="checkbox"/> Science Log |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Auger | <input type="checkbox"/> Pen or pencil |

In the Field

1. Complete the top portion of the *Depth Profile Soil Moisture Data Sheet*.
2. Locate your sampling point on the star and cut and pull away any grass or groundcover.
3. With the trowel, dig a hole 10-15 cm in diameter down to 5 cm. Leave this soil loose in the hole.
4. Remove from the loose soil any rocks larger than a pea (about 5 mm), large roots, worms, grubs, and other animals.
5. Use your trowel to fill your soil container with at least 100 g of the loose soil.
6. Immediately seal the container to hold in the moisture.
7. Record the container number and mass on the *Data Sheet* next to Sample Depth 0-5 cm.
8. Use the auger or trowel to remove all of the soil from the hole down to a depth of 8 cm.
9. In a clean container, collect a soil sample that contains the soil between 8 and 12 cm deep. Remove rocks, large roots and animals. Seal the container.
10. Record the container number and mass on the *Data Sheet* next to Sample Depth 10 cm.
11. Continue to auger down to obtain samples centered at 30, 60, and 90 cm. Record the container numbers and mass values on the *Data Sheet*.
12. You should have 5 containers of soil taken from 1 hole. Return the remaining soil to the hole – last soil out, first in.



Gravimetric Soil Moisture Protocol

Lab Guide

Task

Weigh soil moisture samples, dry them completely, and weigh them again.

What You Need

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soil drying oven
(conventional or microwave) | <input type="checkbox"/> Hot pads or oven mitts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thermometer capable of measuring
to 110° C (if using a conventional
drying oven) | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Soil Moisture Data Sheet</i> with field
information filled in |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soil samples in containers suitable
for your drying oven | <input type="checkbox"/> Science Log |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Balance or scale with 0.1 g sensitivity
and at least 400 g capacity
(600 g recommended) | <input type="checkbox"/> Pen or pencil |

In the Lab

1. Calibrate the balance according to the manufacturer's directions. In your science log, record the standard mass used to calibrate the balance. If using an electronic balance, check that the balance is measuring in grams and is zeroed properly.
2. Remove the lids from each soil sample.
3. Weigh the soil sample without the lid. Record the mass to the nearest 0.1 g as the *Wet Weight* next to the appropriate sample container number on the *Soil Moisture Data Sheet*.
4. Repeat step 2 for the remaining soil samples.
5. Dry your samples in your soil-drying oven.
6. When your samples are dry, fill in drying time and drying method on the *Data Sheet*.
7. Carefully remove the samples from the oven using the hot mitts.
8. Weigh one of the dry soil samples. Record the *Dry Weight* next to the appropriate container number on the *Soil Moisture Data Sheet*.
9. Repeat step 8 for each soil sample.
10. Empty the soil from the containers. Clean and dry each container. (You may save the soil samples in other sealed bags or containers for further tests or return the soil to your site)

Note: Dried soil should be returned to the site to fill in holes so site may be used in future years.



Frequently Asked Questions

1. What should students do if they forgot to weigh the empty soil containers before filling them with samples in the field?

The soil collection containers can be weighed at the end of the soil moisture protocols after emptying the dried soil and cleaning the containers thoroughly. Remember that any dried soil left in the container will lead to an inaccurate container mass.

2. What should students do if the soil is frozen?

Take soil moisture measurements during times when the soil is thawed.



3. The soil moisture site was watered accidentally. Should students continue to collect the next regular sample?

Yes, but make a note in metadata comments regarding what happened and when it happened.

Gravimetric Soil Moisture Protocol – Looking At the Data

Are the Data Reasonable?

The first step a scientist takes when examining soil moisture data is to calculate the Soil Water Content (SWC) for each sample using the formula:

$$\text{Soil Water Content} = \frac{(\text{Wet mass} - \text{Dry mass})}{(\text{Dry mass} - \text{Container mass})}$$

Soil water content typically ranges between 0.05 and 0.50 g/g (grams of water per gram of dry soil). Even soils in dry (desert) regions retain a small amount of water, although surface soils in these regions can fall below 0.05 g/g. Soils with high organic matter or high clay contents can hold large amounts of water, so it is possible to measure values above 0.50 g/g.

The amount of water a soil horizon can hold depends on the amount of pore space (porosity) available. Porosity can be calculated by using the example given in the *Looking At the Data* section of the *Soil Particle Density Protocol*.

Total porosity of a soil can range from as low as 25% in compacted soils to more than 60% in well aerated, high-organic-matter soils.

Looking at some examples helps to understand what different values of soil water content might mean.

Soil Water Content and Soil Particle Density

Consider an organic layer of soil with 50% spaces or voids between the soil particles with half of these spaces filled with water. A 100 cm³ sample would contain 50 cm³ of soil, 25 cm³ of water, and 25 cm³ of air. Typical densities of two different soils and the density of water can be used to illustrate the value of the soil particle density. The mass of the air is negligible and the air will be present in both the wet and dry samples.

$$50 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ of soil} \times 1.0 \text{ g/cm}^3 \text{ soil density} = 50 \text{ g soil}$$

$$25 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ of water} \times 1.0 \text{ g/cm}^3 \text{ water density} = 25 \text{ g water}$$

In this case the Soil Water Content would be 25 g of water divided by 50 g of soil or 0.5 g/g.

Now consider a 100 cm³ sample of a mineral soil with a density of 2.5 g/cm³. Again the sample contains 50 cm³ of soil, 25 cm³ of water, and 25 cm³ of air.

$$50 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ of soil} \times 2.5 \text{ g/cm}^3 \text{ soil density} = 125 \text{ g soil}$$

$$25 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ of water} \times 1.0 \text{ g/cm}^3 \text{ water density} = 25 \text{ g water}$$

In this case the Soil Water Content would be 25 g of water divided by 125 g of soil or 0.2 g/g.



Different soils with the same porosity and the same amount of water present can vary significantly in the value of Soil Water Content, and understanding whether the values measured are reasonable or not is easier if the soil characterization protocols have been done for a horizon.



Soils are expected to show an increase in water content after a rain or during snowmelt, if the soil is not frozen or saturated. Soils gradually dry out during times with little or no precipitation. How the soil dries at different depths depends on the properties of the soil in each horizon. In some cases, water enters the soil from below, when the water table rises. The water content in these soils may be more variable lower in the soil profile than at the surface.



If it rains, some of the rainfall is expected to soak or infiltrate into the ground and increase soil moisture. This infiltration starts happening immediately and can continue for several hours if water continues to be available from a steady rain or puddles. If infiltration continues until all the pore space is filled, then the soil becomes *saturated*. Most soils drain rapidly, usually within hours or days. The field capacity of a soil is the amount of water a soil will hold without downward drainage or redistribution.



As the ground dries from evaporation and transpiration, soil moisture decreases slowly, with the soils closer to the surface usually drying faster than deeper soils. Soil moisture decreases from field capacity to a water content known as the *wilting point*, (the point at which the soil holds the water too tightly for plants to take it up). Depending on the soil properties, soil temperature, air temperature, and relative humidity, it may take from days to weeks for the wilting point to be reached. A general picture of how soil water content changes in a single horizon with time is illustrated in Figure SO-GR-1, however, there are times when the actual data do not follow this pattern.



Moisture content is affected by rainfall variation and soil properties. In a soil profile some horizons retain more water and have a greater porosity than



others, affecting the flow of water from one horizon to another.

For example, if a sandy horizon is located above a clayey horizon, water moving through the sandy horizon will enter the clayey horizon very slowly because of the difference between the large pores in the sandy soil and the very small pores in the clayey soil. The small pores act as a tight layer that only lets water move gradually, so that the sandy soil may actually be much wetter at a given time than the clay.

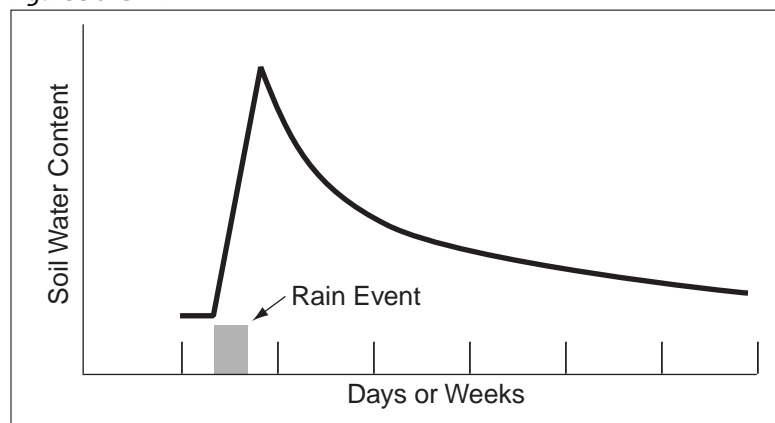
Examining graphs of data collected at three locations will help demonstrate the process to determine whether data is valid or not. The following graphs are used for this demonstration: Valdres, Norway (61.13 N, 8.59 E): Figure SO-GR-2, Stowe, Vermont (44.48 N, 72.708 W): Figure SO-GR-3 and Herrenberg, Germany (48.59 N, 8.88 E): Figure SO-GR-4. Each data set includes rainfall, new snow rain equivalent, and soil moisture.

For the first two schools, the classes chose to take weekly measurements for three months. In this case, the protocol calls for taking measurements during periods when the soil moisture is changing. The students in Valdres, Norway knew from experience that melting winter snow would result in wet soils initially, then drying out gradually as summer approaches. Of course, near-surface soil moisture can also increase during spring rains (as happened on May 28 and later in July).

The students in Stowe, VT decided to monitor their soil moisture as it changed from dry summer conditions to wet fall conditions. Again, the near-surface soil moisture appears more variable, drying significantly for a short period early in October 2001. Conversely, the deeper 10 cm soil moisture shows fewer extreme changes.

The class in Herrenberg, DE decided to take monthly measurements for 12 months to investigate the seasonal cycle of soil moisture in their area. Despite a relatively wet climate, the soil moisture shows a gradual dry-down, particularly at the surface. The soil moisture at 10 cm shows less variation for most of the year.

Figure SO-GR-1



All three of these are interesting data sets. Comparison with precipitation has helped explain some of the variability while applying basic climatic knowledge has helped explain some of the longer-term trends. Knowing the soil characterization properties (texture, bulk and particle density, etc.) helps scientists and students understand more about how water is moving or stored in the soil.

What do scientists look for in the data?

Generally, scientists want to understand how water cycles through the local or regional environment. For example, they want to understand how precipitation and melting snow relate to increases in the water levels of streams, rivers, and lakes. Soil moisture measurements help to understand these processes. When soil moisture measurements are available for a whole profile, they can be used to predict floods, droughts, or the optimal timing for crop irrigation. Scientists also use soil moisture data with soil temperature, relative humidity and land cover data, to estimate the rate at which water is returned to the atmosphere through evaporation and transpiration.

Phenology scientists look at the effect of soil moisture on the annual cycles of plants, such as trees and annual grasses. In some forested regions, tree growth begins in the spring when the soil becomes moist and then stops during the summer when the soil becomes dry.

Scientists are interested in soil moisture changes over time. They are also interested in examining the regional or spatial patterns of soil moisture changes. Scientists focus on patterns rather than the absolute values of the measurements because soil moisture is a function of precipitation, soil texture, infiltration rate and local weather conditions.

Scientists would like to know the soil water content over large areas and ultimately they hope to use remote sensing data from satellites to help measure this. Ground-based soil moisture data are required in order to develop and assess the methods for estimating soil moisture from satellites. By contributing to GLOBE's semiannual soil moisture campaign, students are helping with this exciting scientific advance.

Figure SO-GR-2

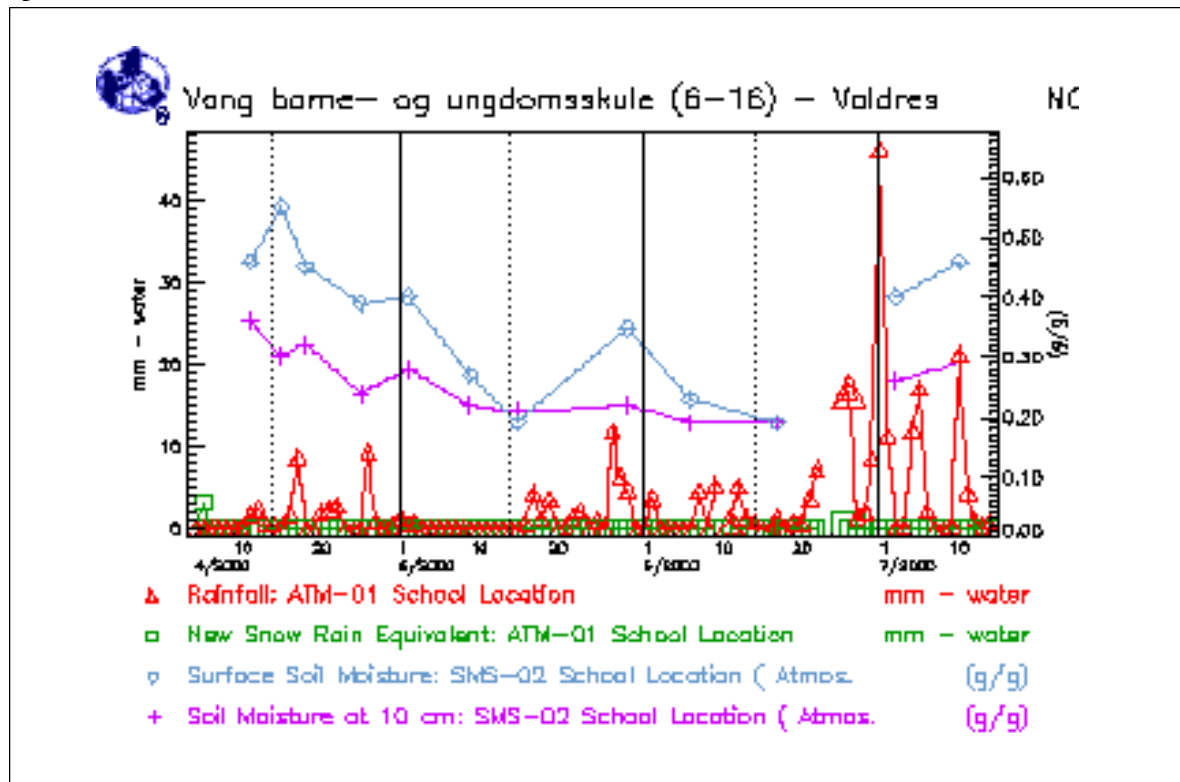


Figure SO-GR-3

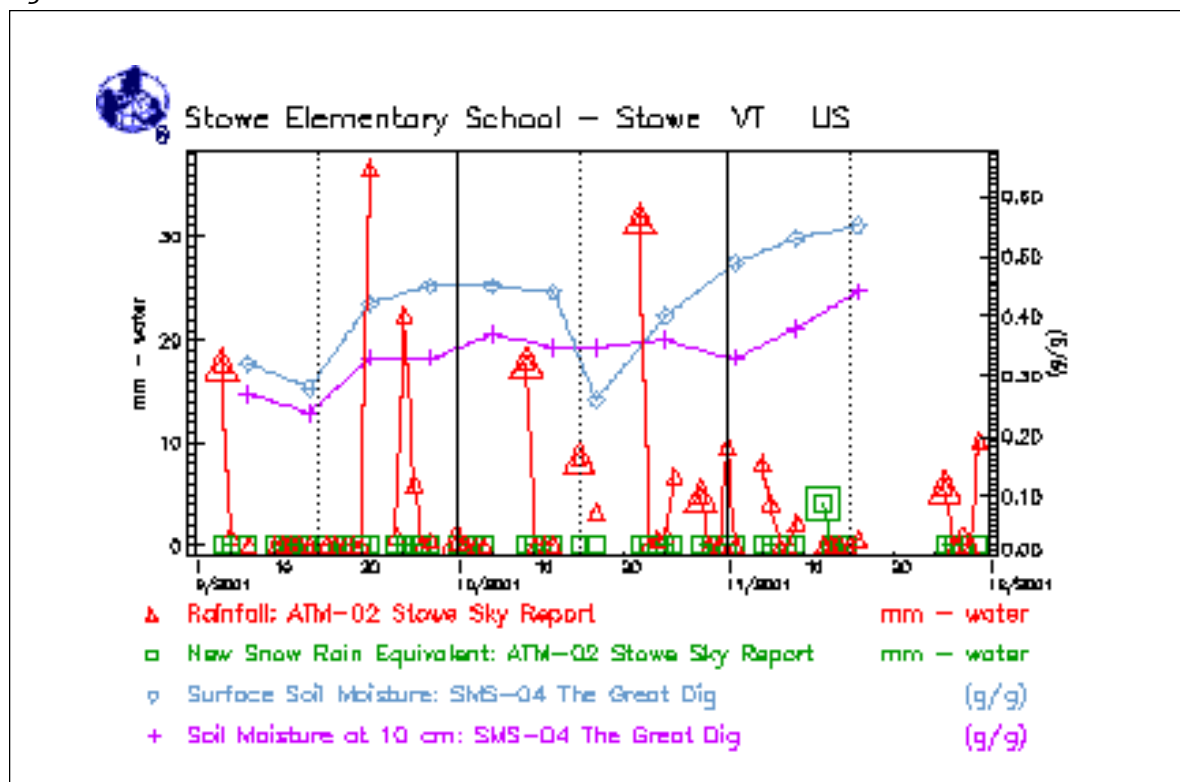
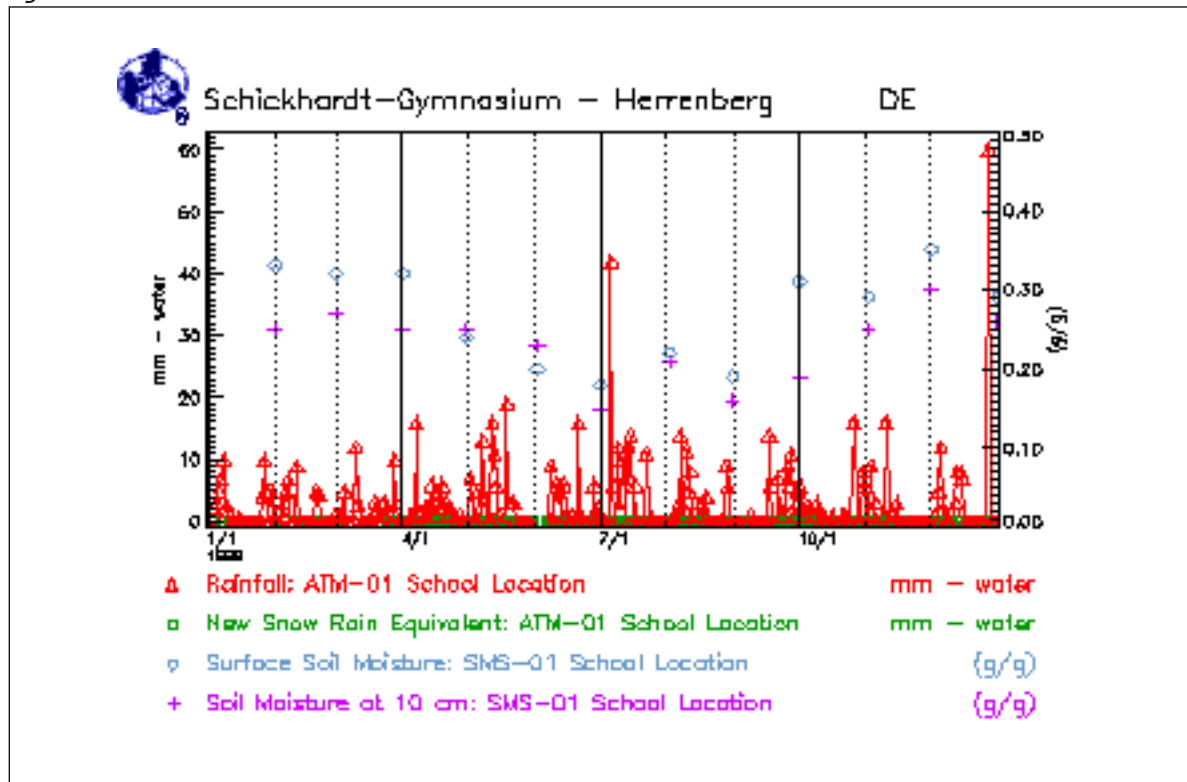


Figure SO-GR-4



An Example of a Student Research Project

Observations

Students at Stowe Elementary School in Vermont, USA collected ten gravimetric soil moisture samples over the autumn months. Figure SO-GR-3 shows a plot of their soil moisture and precipitation data.

Forming a Hypothesis

A common assumption is that soil moisture increases after a rainfall. While this tended to be the overall case for their surface soil moisture data, the students noticed that there were exceptions.

They predicted that these exceptions occurred when soil moisture samples were not collected immediately after precipitation events. The students felt that soil wetting and drying would take longer and require more rainfall at 10 cm depths than the near-surface soil. After looking at their data, the students decided to test the following hypothesis: *Soil moisture at the surface will increase if more than 10 mm of precipitation has fallen in the previous 5 days and soil moisture at 10 cm will increase if more than 20 mm of precipitation has fallen in the previous 10 days.*

Collecting Data

The students chose to analyze their data set first, and then look for other schools that had measured weekly near-surface soil moisture to see if they had similar relationships in their data. They broke into teams, one to analyze their data and the other to look for schools with at least 24 soil moisture observations and more than 100 precipitation observations in the same year. After printing the graph of their data, the students made a table of their data and downloaded it onto their computer.

Analyzing Data

One group of students used colored pencils to mark the five and ten-day periods that preceded each soil moisture observation and added the rainfall amounts for these times to get the total rainfall for each period. They organized their data into a new table, shown below (Table SO-GR-1). Another group of students calculated the change in soil moisture from one reading to the next and added this information to the table. Finally, the class decided whether the data supported their hypothesis or not. In a few cases, there was no change in soil moisture so they modified their original hypothesis to read, "...soil moisture should increase or stay the same ..."

Table SO-GR-1: Stowe, VT 2001 Soil Moisture and Precipitation Data

Date	5-day Precip. Sum (cm)	5 cm Soil Moisture (g/g)	Change in Soil Moisture	Agree?	10-day Precip. Sum (cm)	10 cm Soil Moisture (g/g)	Change in Soil Moisture	Agree?
9/7/01	1.0	0.32			18.6	0.27		
9/14/01	0.2	0.28	-0.04	Y	1.2	0.24	-0.03	Y
9/21/01	36.8	0.42	0.14	Y	37.0	0.33	0.09	Y
9/28/01	30.0	0.45	0.03	Y	66.8	0.33	0	Y
10/5/01	0.5	0.45	0	Y	30.5	0.37	0.04	Y
10/12/01	17.8	0.44	-0.01	N	17.8	0.35	-0.02	Y
10/17/01	11.8	0.26	-0.18	N	29.6	0.35	0	Y
10/25/01	33.5	0.4	0.14	Y	36.7	0.36	0.01	Y
11/2/01	14.5	0.49	0.09	Y	22.3	0.33	-0.03	N
11/9/01	14.4	0.53	0.04	Y	24.0	0.38	0.05	Y
11/16/01	4.8	0.55	0.02	N	7.0	0.44	0.06	N
				70%	80%			



Overall, the students' hypothesis was consistent with 70-80% of their observations. They considered the results to reformulate a better hypothesis. For example, they considered changing the surface precipitation threshold to 12 mm, or actually calculating the depth to which the soil would be wet based on the original soil moisture content and the amount of rain that had fallen. By carefully examining the situations where the hypothesis failed, they might learn more about soil moisture. For example, the surface data from 12 Oct. 2001 might be explained by the fact that all 17.8 mm fell on the first day of the 5-day period so it had time to evaporate or infiltrate into the ground. The students' hypothesis might not work on 16 Nov. 2001 because the weather was colder and the soil was approaching saturation.

Further Research

A similar analysis can be made of data from other schools. Table SO-GR-2 reveals results for springtime data collected in Valdres, Norway. The percentage correct in each column is the same as for the Stowe, VT data set. Students could look for other similarities or differences or try to find other locations around the world to see if this pattern is consistent. Although these students only looked at two years of data, they felt more confident about predicting the relationship between precipitation and soil moisture.

Table SO-GR-2: Valdres, NO 2000 Soil Moisture and Precipitation Data

Date	5-day Precip. Sum (cm)	5 cm Soil Moisture (g/g)	Change in Soil Moisture	Agree?	10-day Precip. Sum (cm)	10 cm Soil Moisture (g/g)	Change in Soil Moisture	Agree?
4/12/00	1.9	0.46			5	0.36		
4/16/00	5.5	0.55	0.09	N	5.6	0.3	-0.06	Y
4/19/00	11.2	0.45	-0.1	N	16.2	0.32	0.02	N
4/26/00	5.5	0.39	-0.06	Y	18.1	0.24	-0.08	Y
5/2/00	3	0.4	0.01	N	15.3	0.28	0.04	N
5/10/00	0	0.27	-0.13	Y	2.6	0.22	-0.06	Y
5/16/00	0	0.19	-0.08	Y	0	0.21	-0.01	Y
5/30/00	24.1	0.35	0.16	Y	28	0.22	0.01	Y
6/7/00	0	0.23	-0.12	Y	15	0.19	-0.03	Y
6/18/00	3.4	0.19	-0.04	Y	19	0.19	0	Y
7/3/00	68.5	0.4	0.21	Y	98.4	0.26	0.07	Y
7/11/00	24	0.46	0.06	Y	64.9	0.29	0.03	Y
				70%	80%			